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ABSTRACT

A singular means of blending the history, language arts, and journalism classes is by teaching oral history. By assigning students oral history projects, the teacher helps students place themselves within a living history in the United States. For example, Eliot Wigginton, a public high school English teacher in Rabun Gap, Georgia, whose classes started producing the "Foxfire" magazines in 1966, does not call his philosophy "whole language," but it is much the same. The teacher is facilitator, and the students learn by doing. Similarly, librarian Carol Cribbet-Bell created the Carrillo Heritage Center to preserve cultural materials and foster an understanding of the barrio in which her students lived. Roosevelt's New Deal Federal Writers Project is perhaps one of the largest attempts to record and publish the oral history of the masses. Oral history can appear as a local newspaper column on local history or a local radio station's "Voices from the Past." Oral history projects at universities, secondary schools, and in communities tape the stories of as many people as possible for historians of the future. Oral histories exist primarily as anthologies, not in the mass media world of newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. The incorporation of oral history in the mass media would move academic history closer to the social sciences. (Contains 36 references.) (RS)

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Oral History: A Voice for America

When we are young, we generally see our world as organized into tight little categories which cannot be easily diffused, so, too, are our high schools structured. History class is the teaching of history (and history alone, not writing or culture or anything else); language arts class is the teaching of the English language (composition, grammar, and literature); and journalism class is the teaching of journalism (often with the students producing a newspaper, magazine, or yearbook). Students frequently question their "English" teachers when their teachers spend time teaching British history or culture: that is not perceived by the students as the subject that is supposed to be taught in that particular class. As one grows older, however, the world begins to blend more and more; there are overlaps which were not previously apparent; and there are fewer tight categories which cannot be unleashed. Few blacks and whites exist, but many shades of gray. We would be wise to use this concept of a wholeness or oneness in life, which generally comes with age, and incorporate it within the curricula in the high schools of the 1990s, considerably speeding up this perception and hopefully spreading it into our mass media as well.

A singular means of blending the history, language arts, and journalism classes is by teaching oral history. "In the broad view, anything that is 'oral' and that is recorded and preserved becomes 'oral history'" (Moss 8). These may be done by a historian, a sociologist, a folklorist, a journalist, a military intelligence officer, or whomever (Moss 7). By assigning students to interview their grandparents, senior citizens in the community, or their parents, the teacher helps the students place themselves within a living history in the United States. With this historical study, the students learn about their own culture and are able to write about it as

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young language arts students/journalists/historians. And the teacher becomes an holistic (in the best sense of that word) teacher.

According to Roy Peter Clark in his *Free to Write* (1987), there are only two roles for elementary and middle school teachers: 1) substitute parent and 2) editor (8). Clark's own experience documents this: "At Bay Point we turned the classroom into a newsroom, if you will, a writing laboratory where ten-year-olds were treated like writers, and where they could confer with teachers and other students" (3). Students were able to learn sentence structure and composition skills by actually writing and using the teacher as editor. This idea resounds with "whole language" techniques. Whole language is

> about much more than instruction in reading and literacy. It's about empowerment and the role of teachers, students, and texts in education. In short, it's about who controls what goes on in the classroom. Will educational decisions be made by teachers and students or by administrators, curriculum developers, textbook publishers, and policymakers? (Gursky 27).

In a whole language-based school, the content areas adopt holistic assessment in math, art, history, and foreign languages (Ladestro 45). Elaine Hehman, a history teacher who team teaches with an English teacher in Upper Arlington High School's eleventh grade American studies class says, "We use history to support students' understanding of the literature and literature to support their understanding of the history" (45).

Eliot Wigginton, a public high school English teacher in Rabun Gap, Georgia, whose classes started producing the *Foxfire* magazines in 1966 does not call his philosophy "whole language," but it is much the same. The teacher is the facilitator, and the students learn by doing. Wigginton's students blend the history of the area in which he is teaching with journalism and English as they produce remarkable, truthful writing (published by Doubleday and earning millions of dollars--like real professionals) year after year after year.

Wigginton did not simply stumble upon a group of extremely gifted, motivated young people who DID this. But he was able to see that he was not reaching the young people whom he was assigned to teach with the classics; therefore, he gave the students empowerment in the classroom, pulling from them writing reflective of the culture of the area, written in a

manner better than they would have otherwise written. The students became a real part of the world around them, and the classroom walls vanished. This is education at its best--call it whole language, cultural journalism, or inter-disciplinary studies. It made sense to the students, and the teacher did not stand in their way. Therefore, they began to produce a product in which they took much pride for it was for an audience beyond the lone teacher within the four walls of the classroom.

When teachers pompously state that their students can scan any poem put before them, read and analyze Chaucer, Shakespeare, Faulkner, etc., they confidently feel as if they have taught their students all their students need to know. History teachers who boast that their students completed a 1365 page history text during the year need to once again evaluate what the students truly took with them from that class into the world outside the school. How much of that will still be used--or even thought of by those same students--ten years after graduation? However, if students are taught to work collaboratively, to examine the work around them objectively, and to think critically; the skills are lifetime ones. Aunt Addie Norton in Wigginton's introduction to his *Sometimes a Shining Moment* says, "I tell you one thing, if you learn it by yourself, if you have to get down and dig for it, it never leaves you. It stays there as long as you live because you had to dig it out of the mud before you learned what it was."

Wigginton writes that when he has polled students about teachers they have had and who have made a difference in their lives, he hits upon one recurring theme: "'Once I had a teacher who really knew her subject. She loved it. She brought it alive for us. Lots of times we'd put the books away and do related things together, or just talk--really talk--and I still remember those classes today. They were something" (201). The key to this recurring idea is the phrase "do related things together."

The major problem, according to Eliot Wigginton, is that our schools are much too rigid. "Through our rules and regulations and imposed curricula and near-complete dominance of their lives, we hold students in a state of enforced early adolescence through all of high school, ignoring the tremendous hunger all young people have to do important, significant work; to make a difference in the community; to begin to feel that the future really does consist of opportunity rather than denial" (237).

The Wigginton students are not anomalous. Librarian Carol Cribbet-Bell created the Carrillo Heritage Center to preserve cultural materials and foster an understanding of the barrio in which her students lived. Her Carillo Heritage Center is not just a place, but a series of programs, blending community and school (Colwell 136). Residents of the barrio were interviewed by the young students and these interviews were taped and transcribed, making a 62-page book, illustrated by the students as well. In order to bring these stories to life, Carol Cribbet-Bell formed a Readers' Theater troupe which dramatized the stories for schools in Tucson. A cookbook was written, followed by a book of Tucson's celebrations. "The students' efforts are rewarded not only by publication of their work, but through the growth in their self-esteem and the accolades they receive as authors and artists at the publication parties Cribbet-Bell throws for all participants" (136). Again, the self-esteem and the students' blending with the world around them help the students throughout their lives. A similar barrio group which used folklore, cultural journalism, whole language, is Juan M. Flores' group of young Chicano, Mexican and American students in California (72). All of these young people, just like Wigginton's, are folklorists.

According to Jesse Goodman and Kate Melcher, the anthroliterary approach (just another name for the same type of whole-language teaching) to cross-cultural education uses the oral or written literature of a cultural group to understand its way of life (200). Folklore helps us understand the culture of an area. Linda Howard, a journalism adviser in Oklahoma, worked with her students to produce a cultural magazine in her cultural journalism program. She, a journalism teacher, did just what the "English teachers" and "librarians" were doing--having the students study the real world around them and listen to the people who had been in that world longer than they had.

"The study of contemporary folklore . . . is actually the study of ourselves" (Juska 37). Jane Juska, a teacher in Ygnacio Valley High in Concord, California, found that the writing of her students during the folklore study was

> good. It was honest. It had voice. It had enthusiasm. It even had correctness. Now why, I asked myself, couldn't they do that when I assigned a whole variety of topics on *The Crucible*? . . . The

> folklore topic had belonged to the kids from the beginning: the experiences they were recreating were theirs; the results they tabulated followed from the data they had collected; the reflection on what this all meant had come from them (Juska 38).

Using the same techniques, Edward Anderson found that the style and language of the Black folk tradition have significantly affected the development of English. Therefore, he argues that an analysis of Black persuasive techniques and communication systems can enhance the teaching of composition, rhetoric, and literature for both Black and white students (Kendall 31).

If English teachers find reading Norse mythology a legitimate study into insights into the Norse culture in their classroom, why shouldn't they have their students study their own folklore for insights into their own American culture as well? (Simons 33).

This abandonment of oral history can be found not only in the classrooms, but also in the scholarly study of both history and literature. The abandonment of oral sources by historians left moral philosophers and folklorists as the only ones with an interest in oral tradition (Henige 15). Ironically, most of our history has been written by outsiders, and presently, this is nowhere more apparent than in Third World research (Henige 25). Many literary scholars relegate folklore to a less prestigious position in the scholarly world than most other studies. Consequently, there should be little wonder as to why oral history/folklore has been given such a small place in our school curricula.

This is blatantly true in the world of mass media, as well. A.H. Raskin, assistant editorial page editor at the New York *Times*, "took to task what he saw as the 'unshatterable smugness' of most publishers and editors and the 'self-righteousness, self-satisfaction and self-congratulation' that characterized so much of the American press" (Ettema and Glasser 3). "Although media spokespeople agree that efforts should be made to open more time and white space to individuals, minority groups, unpopular ideas, and simply nonconsensus thinking, they also quail at the idea of compulsory acceptance of everything offered a station, newspaper, or magazine" (Emery and Emery 743).

Just as in the school curricula, the use of oral history/folklore can help the students understand the world around them, the media's use of this

can produce the same results for the public at large. "Use of the mass media allows individuals who do not have close links with those in their neighborhood to compare their own opinions to those of more 'generalized' others; it would not be surprising if they also form perceptions of neighbors' opinions from these comparisons" (Glynn 688). After interviewing 297 individuals from 31 neighborhoods, most of whom had lived there for at least eleven years, Glynn noted that "a large proportion of people feel that the world they live in agrees with their own opinions on public issues" (689). The idea that "public opinion is formed and affected by the availability of information, by constraints on receiving information and by the . . . groups to which individuals belong" was supported by this study (689). Glynn further notes that "[p]luralistic ignorance is a situation where the minority position in public opinion is incorrectly perceived to be the majority position and vice versa" (689).

One type of writing in which a multitude of beliefs is given and human personalities from every ethnic group, neighborhood, personality can be seen is that of oral history. Through the use of oral history in the media, the real lives of many otherwise unknown individuals will be related to the public, and similarly, people who desperately need to tell their own stories will be allowed to do so.

Roosevelt's New Deal sponsored the Federal Writers Project, which "pioneered the collection of first-person narratives by people who would otherwise not have left a record. Benjamin Botkin [folklore editor of the Project in 1938 and 1939] called for an emphasis on 'history from the bottom up,' in which the people became their own historians. He believed that history must study the inarticulate many as well as the articulate few. The advent of tape recorders in the years following the 1930s has refined the practice of what has come to be called oral history. . . ."(Banks xx). Poet Muriel Rukeser later described such activity as the "key to the Thirties," to see life in its entirety by telling the stories of real people (Banks xix).

The FWP produced something that had never before been produced: a series of oral history interviews that formed a "composite portrait of America through the storytelling of people from various occupations, regions, and ethnic groups" (Banks xiv). Of the forty-one Federal Writers whose works are included in Banks' *First-Person America*, more than half

published books after they left the Project (Banks xviii). This rate is a tremendous rate of access to the media and, consequently, to the public. By presenting a written record of personal stories, Federal Writers offered men and women the hope that their voices might be heard by an audience beyond their immediate circle of family and friends, and that their lives would touch people they had never met" (Banks xxiv). These oral history narratives reveal the source of strength and the meaning of life for these people: "ethnic roots, family life, the spirit of community that came with shared hardships"(Banks xxiv). The FWP is probably the one largest attempt to record and publish the oral history of the masses. Two of the anthologies from this project have been classified as classics: *Lay My Burden Down*, the narratives of former slaves and *These Are Our Lives*, lives of black and white Southerners (Banks xiv).

Oral history can appear as a local newspaper column on local history or a local radio station's "Voices from the Past"(Sitton, Mehaffy, and Davis 121). The Baton Rouge *Morning Advocate*'s Sunday "Guest Columnist" and its weekly "Who We Are" are regular "oral history" features which offer general access to the public, and periodically, an oral history narrative, of someone in the community, will appear. National Public Radio often features interviews which could certainly be termed oral history; these interviews, eliciting narratives from the people interviewed, have included inner-city gang leaders and members, victims of floods, former drug addicts going through rehabilitation, black and white students in a high school experiencing racial problems, welfare mothers, as well as a multitude of others who are not regular fare in the media. *Newsweek* magazine has a weekly guest columnist feature which is open to the public; articles here could be loosely classified as oral history. What all of these features have in common is that "everyday people," as opposed to movie stars, athletes, politicians, are allowed to give their feelings and perceptions of the world around them. This is the special quality of oral history. Anyone may be the one who contributes a viewpoint, an idea, reflecting Andy Warhol's attitude toward celebrity. Although these features are not literally oral history in that it was recorded and transcribed just as the stories were told, they capture, just like oral history, the unabashed quality of the individual in society, something many journalists relegate to folklorists or historians.

Oral history has its beginnings in non-literate societies, where it is revered as the only means by which the people keep their history alive. For example, in western Africa there are tribes that have their own trained historians called "griots," who stored the history of the entire community (Brown 3). These historians were the beginning "journalists," but that function has been almost lost. Unfortunately, in early western tradition, oral historians were superseded by accounts written for elite groups that could read and write. The masses were not really considered part of history; history was something that happened to kings and their advisers (Brown 3). But as the printing press made multiple copies of people's accounts possible, history was expanded to include stories about more people (Brown 3). From the nineteenth century up to World War II, the vast majority of people did not appear in the history books (Brown 4).

However, since World War II, history has actually been opened to everyone. Voices are now heard that were never heard before: voices of slaves, immigrants, suppressed minorities, children, and the elderly (Brown 5). But in writing history we can never write everything; the complexity we face is simply too immense. Even in literate record-keeping societies much information goes unrecorded. Frequently, the banal is preserved while the significant is left off the record (Moss 8). Bad oral history is unfortunately easy to do, especially in an age of journalistic "talk shows." Anyone with audacity and a tape recorder can do oral history after a fashion (Moss 11). Now with tape recorders to record more eye-witness accounts, we have more sources from which to work. Oral history projects at universities, secondary schools, and in communities tape the stories of as many people as possible for historians of the future.

The oral history program of the John F. Kennedy Library centers on the life of a particular man and the politics of a particular presidency (Moss 1). Studs Terkel is a journalist who has written several oral histories, *Hard Times*, *American Dreams*, *Working*, and *Division Street*. Terkel writes in the introduction to *Working*, "To be remembered was the wish, spoken and unspoken, of the heroes and heroines of this book" (Terkel, *Working* xi). Radcliffe College has a Tully-Crenshaw Feminist Oral History Project. "'Since we don't have the journals, diaries, and letters, we would like . . . it seems that the next best thing would be to tape the memories of people who were there" ("NOW Oral History Project"

16). Those interviewed were asked to document how they became feminists, their contributions, activities, costs of activities. Cuyahoga County Public Library (Cleveland) reports a program on experiences of Vietnam veterans and the present-day effects of that war on them ("Vietnam in the Public Library" 2198). This program is co-sponsored by the Vietnam Vets of American, high school student councils, and area PTOs and was videotaped for use in area high schools.

Tom Tiede's *American Tapestry* is an account of fifty-plus Americans in their seventies, eighties, and nineties who experienced all sorts of events in American life from the Dust Bowl to Three-Mile Island. Tiede notes that recollections have been modified from the verbatim recordings and rearranged for sake of clarity (7). The National Council of Teachers of English's *English Journal* has published oral histories of English teachers who share their unique classroom experiences in this way (Monseau and Knox 49-51). Meckler Publishing in Westport, Connecticut. was selected by Columbia University, which has one of the oldest oral history programs in the nation--going back to 1948 when it was established, to distribute its oral history interviews on microfiche ("Meckler to Distribute Oral History Program" 541). Of course, one of the most famous of the high school oral histories is Eliot Wigginton's *Foxfire* experience in Rabun Gap, Georgia. Wig, as he likes to be called, says, "'We're also correcting a stereotype about the area and people of Appalachia'"(Wright 120). No subject is too large or too small for *Foxfire*, from treeing a raccoon to how to build a log cabin. *Harper's Magazine* includes oral histories frequently, publishing such histories as that of a mulatto girl's recollections of her white father,(Tucker 36-40), a dialogue of an elderly couple in a small community(Parker 35-9), and a Chinese entrepreneur's reminiscences (Zhang Xinxin and Sang Ye 35-8).

Studs Terkel, perhaps the most famous oral historian in America, said in his preface to *American Dreams: Lost and Found*, "There is no pretense at statistical 'truth' nor consensus. There is, in the manner of a jazz work, an attempt, of theme and improvisation, to recount dreams, lost and found, and a recognition and possibility." In Terkel's *Division Street*, he reveals, "Each of the subjects is, I feel, uniquely himself. Whether he is an archetypal American figure, reflecting thought and condition over and beyond himself, is for the reader to judge, calling upon his own

experience, observation and an occasional look in the mirror" (25). However, just as in the dominant, "regular" American media, there is selection; Studs Terkel chooses carefully those whom he interviews. But there is a reversal of sorts in the means of selection: Deliberate omissions in the book are clergymen, college professors, journalists, and writers of any kind (21). Terkel felt that "their articulateness and literacy offered them other forums. They had created their own books" (21). They already had "public access" to the media. Consequently, Studs Terkel emphasizes the kind of people who comprise oral history: America's grassroots.

For *Division Street* Terkel had originally contacted Dr. Philip Hauser, a demographer at the University of Chicago, to see if there was a Chicago street where all manner of ethnic, racial and income groups live. He discovered that there was no such street, so he made up his own: Division Street on which he populated a diversity of people who would perhaps have occupied the street of which he inquired had it truly existed.

During his three years of interviewing that contributed to his book *Working*, Terkel says, " . . . I may have, on more occasions than I had imagined, struck gold. I was constantly astonished by the extraordinary dreams of ordinary people" (xxiv). This is the beauty and the contribution of oral history to the media: a public access that touches the heart.

In Tom Tiede's *American Tapestry*, people are included who have been on the peripheral of fame, giving us additional knowledge about famous people. Bud Shelton was a high school student in the class of teacher John Scopes. Shelton met William Jennings Bryan and was subpoenaed for the Scopes trial. He says, "John Scopes taught at Rhea Central High School, the only one in town, and I was in his class. He was actually a math teacher, and the football coach, and athletic director, but he was substituting for the science teacher at the time" (216).

Tiede's Brooke Johns says, "I got sick when I smoked my first cigarette. That was a terribly bad thing for a young boy to do. Today I read about ten-year-old dope fiends" (13). The juxtaposition of ideas in such sentences says volumes about American society. James Drummond, another part of the tapestry, is ninety-two and may be the oldest Ku Klux Klan member in America(26-7). How often do other Americans read the views of such an American? Al Kooper, a Jew who survived the

Holocaust, says, "I cannot forget. It will always be. That I'm alive is a miracle" (38). Too few history books contain such first-person impressions of historical events. How often do American newspapers or magazines include such fresh, vibrant stories of real life? "It [oral history] is ancient, and its modern employment is one answer to the increased demand for information and to the increased appreciation for where evidence can be found" (Moss 9).

Like Studs Terkel, Eliot Wigginton notes in his book *The Foxfire Experience* how very important the continuance of memory and experiences is. In *The Foxfire Experience*, Wigginton traces his experience with oral history from its inception. The Appalachian people in Wigginton's books share their life experiences, whether they are making moonshine or soap. Their oral histories, recorded by high school students, give importance to their lives that would otherwise perhaps simply vanish. Lives that can have impact on others would disappear without being afforded that opportunity.

Alex Haley notes the importance of family reunions in *Jet Magazine*, stressing the oral history of families that would vanish without these events ("Family Reunions Needed to Trace Roots" 26). Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust* denotes the film by that name and relates the histories of victims of that dreadful historical event that would perhaps, without such recordings, remain just words on the pages of history texts. The list goes on and on, but today oral histories, exist primarily as anthologies, not in the mass media world of newspapers, magazines, radio, and television.

True public access would naturally include such oral histories--and true oral histories at that--more often in newspapers, magazines, radio shows, and on television. The incorporation of oral history in the mass media would be moving academic history closer to the social sciences (Sitton 11). "Oral history research is a kind of fieldwork, and field research methods are a systematic way to make social 'sense' our of unfamiliar social settings in which the researchers are themselves participants" (Sitton 18). Lewis Dexter feels that the interviewer must possess "'as many of the virtues as possible of a good social scientist, a good reporter, and a good historian'" (Sitton 19). But with the aid of a good interviewer and the publication of oral history in the media, oral

history offers a means for the accurate recording and preservation of personal sources that fill out history and give depth and breadth to life (Moss 9).

With more and more *Foxfire*-type magazines appearing in the nation's schools, young people are being initiated into the rites of oral history and are sensitized to its attributes. In 1977 there were eighty-four *Foxfire*-like publications; in 1983 there were over two hundred (Sitton 10). "The classroom oral history project results in something of real value to families, community, school, and the larger world of historical scholarship" (Sitton 20). If this practice of incorporating the spoken lives of everyday individuals continues to spread from American classrooms into the American media, it will give more true "public access" to the American media. Whether it is a government-sponsored oral history such as the Federal Writers Project, grant-supported oral histories such as by the National Endowment of the Arts or the Humanities, or the hiring of "oral history" editors in the nations' media by means of a voluntarily incorporated oral history element (of which there are presently a few) into the public media; many benefits are being derived and have already been derived from the publication of oral history in anthologies and in the media--both print and broadcast, and they are certainly in tune with America's democratic ideals. In fact, using oral history in the American media seems to fulfill the democratic ideals that Walt Whitman set forth in his Preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*:

> Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses. Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes.

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